Russian Short Stories

A Legend

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A Legend by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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The tall, thin, long-haired man, in whose face were so strangely blended the paleness of a life full of starvation and moral impurity and the stern profoundness of inspiration, began to play on his violin. It was a majestic, fairy tune, plaintively beautiful in its upper notes, dominated by sombre sadness in the lower. There was something medieval in it, something hopeless, unpleasantly sweet, cruel, prolonged, and terrifying.

The host, who considered himself a patron of music, dressed in a red dressing-gown, his large, light, wandering eyes glistening almost like those of a madman, arose from his chair, and, pretending to be overwhelmed by the ecstasy of creative inspiration, began to improvise a story to the music. And the studiedly irregular motions of his sleeves were overturning glasses and goblets on the wet cloth.

“It was long ago …” he began, closing his eyes and lifting up his chin, so that his words were curiously distorted. He seemed to speak like a foreigner, although he was of a well-known noble family, and a man of good education.

“It was long ago. … Oh, how long ago it was! Many ages have gone by. … Oh, how many ages. … And everybody has forgotten about this. It was so dreadfully long ago. …”

Suddenly a man arose from among those who were sitting about the table. He had been silent until then, and very few knew him. Someone had brought him to this house and did not even go to the trouble of introducing him. He was poorly dressed, short and broad-shouldered, vulgar in appearance, with his hair cut in a peculiarly ludicrous fashion.

“Won’t you please allow me?” said he, and there was entreaty in his voice.

The patron, stepping back like a clown, bending down and swinging his arms from his chest to the ground, said in the voice of a clown:

“Why, certainly.”

“Start at the beginning,” said the vulgar stranger, turning to the violinist.

His eyes met the eyes of the violinist for one short instant, and he began to speak with the first chords of the violin.

It was long, long ago. Many an old family has died out since then, many an ancient castle has been destroyed.

At that time the old castle was still standing on a rock in the middle of the lake. And everybody around knew that the lake was fathomless, that the castle was impregnable, and that the long iron bridge was raised at night.

From time to time the king sent letters to the owner of the castle, calling him his cousin, and offering him titles and honors. But the proud prince, instead of thanking the king, ordered the royal messengers to be hung on the towers of his castle. He was afraid of no one. His castle was impregnable,

and was always provisioned for a ten years' siege.

The prince was noble, strong, and madly brave, although he was already sixty years of age. With the merry cry of an eagle, terrible in the ruddy glow of tar torches, he galloped at the head of his knights, over the bridge, and beneath him the waves were splashing in the dark, and the hoof-beats of the flying steeds were like the sound of the waves. Then villages burned in flames, women wept, and the rich transports of travelling merchants were his booty.

No one knows why he married the girl he chose. Were there not enough beautiful women among the daughters of his vassals? Would not any daughter of a noble family be honored by his choice? He celebrated a wild wedding, drank wine, cast handfuls of diamonds to his servants, and constantly gazed at his young wife with his enormous, wild, colorless eyes. She was the daughter of a poor artist.

A long, long year went by, then another, and still another. The young wife grew pale and more pale; the dreadful eyes of the prince became more and more terrible. Villages blazed at night. Half-wild dogs devoured the entrails of the captive women sentenced to death.

Thousands of eyes attended upon the beautiful woman. But there was one pair that gazed upon her with gentle passion, that spoke to her: "Here is my life. Take it, if it is needed. I love you! …"

One day—so reads the dark legend—the prince returned from an expedition and found a young page on his knees before the

princess. He ordered the page led into the courtyard, and there put him to death by sending a bullet into his right eye.

He did not touch his wife. But he gathered his obedient, boisterous company, gave each one gold with the generosity of a king, and said to them:

“You are free. Go wherever you will.”

And when the last of them had crossed the iron bridge, the prince himself raised it, broke the chain, and locked the great gates of the castle.

The knights turned around to cast a last gaze upon the castle, and, as they did so, they saw the prince appear in the highest window of the tower and cast the great iron key that locked the castle gates into the fathomless lake.

Year after year went by. No one ever learned the secret of the old, sombre castle. Now nothing remains of it but ruins, mosses, and dirt, where green lizards are creeping back and forth, and honeysuckles scent the silent air. What happened to those two human beings? Did they suffer much and long? Which of them suffered more?

No one, no one will ever learn the secret. The waves are dashing against the stone casements. … The old, terror-inspiring hoof-beats of galloping horses seem to resound through their splashing. No one will ever know the secret. …

And the quiet waves are splashing on the shore. …

Both became silent at the same time, the violinist and the improviser. And amidst the quivering silence that still reigned around, the host sniffed sneeringly, and said:

“Is that all? Y-yes. Not much, but rather sad.”